

VZCZCXYZ0002
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHWN #0979/01 1591840
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 081840Z JUN 06
FM AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2660
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1451
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J2 MIAMI FL
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J5 MIAMI FL
RUEHCV/USDAO CARACAS VE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BRIDGETOWN 000979

SIPDIS

NOFORN
SIPDIS

SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/01/2016
TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL SOCI KDEM KPAO XL
SUBJECT: FREEDOM OF THE PRESS THREATENED IN THE EASTERN
CARIBBEAN

REF: A. BRIDGETOWN 829
 IB. BRIDGETOWN 429
 IC. 05 BRIDGETOWN 1420

Classified By: DCM Mary Ellen T. Gilroy for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

I1. (C/NOFORN) Summary: Freedom of the press is threatened in the Eastern Caribbean by governments that are increasingly intolerant of criticism. Government officials in several countries have threatened to impose legal standards upon what they complain is an unrestrained media that engages in libel and character assassination. Politicians have also used various legal mechanisms to strike out at journalists thought to be overly critical or simply too inquisitive. To date, only St. Lucia has adopted legislation intended to allow the Government means to intimidate and potentially punish the press, although Eastern Caribbean authorities have found other methods to harass and even jail media figures. Such actions have elicited concern from media practitioners and NGOs committed to protecting the rights of journalists and the free press. This troubling situation is indicative of the limited development of civil society in these small island states, in which political leaders are given considerable power over sovereign nations that are in reality small communities of limited political maturity. End summary.

Freedom of the Press Threatened

I2. (U) Eastern Caribbean political leaders are increasingly turning to threats and extra-legal means to temper what they believe is a biased and irresponsible press. Nearly all governments in the region have threatened at some point to impose legal standards that officials argue are necessary to tame the excesses of newspapers and talk radio. Several government figures have taken direct action against what they perceive as unwarranted criticism and slander by filing libel suits against individual journalists and media figures. In extreme circumstances, such actions have led to journalists being detained by the police for questioning about their sources. While observers concede that at times the Caribbean media, particularly talk radio, allow unfounded accusations to go unchallenged, the current climate of government intimidation has led NGOs such as the Association of Caribbean Media Workers and the International Press Institute to issue warnings about growing media self-censorship and threats to freedom of the press.

Talk Radio Stirs Up Governments

¶13. (U) Much of the impetus behind calls to legislate media standards has been the daily stream of opinion and criticism found on talk radio throughout the Eastern Caribbean. The region has seen significant growth in the number of radio stations during the past decade, with much of the air time devoted to talk shows that focus on politics and issues of the day. In some instances, the opposing political parties sponsor their own talk radio programs on which the partisan host can be guaranteed to turn the discussion in favor of their party. The criticism offered against sitting governments, and charges made against officials, by callers to these programs are often harsh and unsubstantiated, relying on rumor and conjecture, according to incumbent politicians. Governments have responded by calling for standards that would govern the media and prohibit what officials say is slander and character assassination. Critics of such measures argue that the region's vigorous libel laws should be adequate protection for public figures against any media excesses.

¶14. (U) A typical example of a government official threatening to rein in the media can be found in Dominica. Shortly after winning re-election in May 2005, Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit criticized radio call-in programs that persisted in a "campaign of tearing down, blackguarding and undermining" the country through criticism of the Government. In response, the PM proposed to strengthen the law to "stamp out lawlessness and irresponsible behavior, calculated to do harm to the image and viability of our country." Even in staid Barbados, where political culture is more mature than in smaller Caribbean countries, Prime Minister Owen Arthur criticized in Parliament the nation's leading political radio

program for airing talk that desecrates the Sabbath.

St. Lucia: Spreading False News a Crime

¶15. (U) St. Lucia is, so far, the only Eastern Caribbean country to have legislation that observers believe was passed specifically to provide the Government with the legal means to punish critics in the media. In 2003, the St. Lucia Parliament added a prohibition against "spreading false news" to the nation's criminal code, making it punishable by two years' imprisonment to publish a "statement, tale or news that...is false and that causes or is likely to cause injury or mischief to a public interest." To date, the law has not been used although it is frequently the topic of discussion in the press.

¶16. (U) In 2004, when the false news legislation went into effect, St. Lucia Prime Minister Kenny Anthony and other officials publicly defended the law, known as Section 361, by using the example of a newspaper knowingly publishing a false account of a deadly disease arriving in St. Lucia, which would ruin the nation's tourism industry. One Government Minister claimed in Parliament that St. Lucia had already seen such "instances of media terrorism" without offering any examples. Because, however, the PM had complained on numerous occasions that members of the media were engaged in a disinformation campaign intended to bring down his Government, many journalists believe that Section 361 is intended to bully the media into being less critical. The editor of the "St. Lucia Star," the nation's leading newspaper, criticized the law in an editorial as "unjust" and "ominous" legislation intended to protect incumbent politicians and gag "an already diffident, frightened, barely surviving local media."

St. Vincent: Stifling the Media

¶17. (U) The St. Vincent media have seen a steadily worsening

situation in which various media practitioners have been the targets of attacks by Government officials. The nation's typically raucous talk radio has come in for particular criticism. In 2005, the Government successfully used an obscure law to prosecute the nation's leading radio show host for making statements "likely to cause public alarm" during an opposition party meeting (ref C). After Government critics turned up the level of invective on talk radio to promote their views during the country's December 2005 election campaign, Government officials responded with calls for legal media standards (ref A). In February 2006, Minister of Information Selmon Walters complained, "At the moment there are no standards. At the moment, there is no regulation policy. Anybody can talk. People can say what they want." The St. Vincent media responded critically, with an editorial in "The News," the nation's leading newspaper, calling the Government proposal "a dangerous precedent in stifling the media."

Crucifixion and Media Bashing

¶18. (U) St. Vincent newspapers have also come in for official criticism, including a recent incident in which Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves publicly excoriated the weekly "Vincentian" for several editorials critical of the Government's handling of crime. The editor, Ashford Peters, responded with an editorial that appeared on April 14, Good Friday, titled "The Agony of Crucifixion and Media Bashing," comparing the abused St. Vincent press to Christ. The editor wrote, among other things, that the "crown of thorns placed on Jesus' head reminds us of the mockery, and disrespect by some, and the unrelenting pressures placed on some journalists and media practitioners to resist compromise as we struggle to preserve press freedom and adhere to the ethics of the profession." Within two weeks, the newspaper's management sacked the editor, an action decried by an ad hoc committee of journalists as sending a "wrong and chilling signal to media workers" as the dismissal came so soon after the PM criticized the editor. These and other journalists are currently forming an organization to represent media workers in St. Vincent.

Grenada: Police Detain Newspaper Editor

¶19. (U) Grenada has what could be considered the most troubling record of Government attempts to intimidate journalists. In March, the police detained and questioned George Worme, editor of "Grenada Today," one of the island's four weekly newspapers, in connection with a letter published in the paper that was the subject of a criminal libel suit. The letter to the editor was critical of an individual involved in the Government's ongoing, controversial effort to remove from Parliament a leading opposition member for having dual Grenadian/Canadian citizenship. The President of the Grenada Bar Association complained that the editor's detention was a blatant Government "attack on the freedom of the press." The Media Workers Association of Grenada said the action was "designed to pressure the media" and criticized the Government for a pattern of media intimidation.

Prime Minister Threatens Journalist

¶10. (U) The Government of Grenada, and Prime Minister Keith Mitchell in particular, came in for similar criticism in 2004 when the police detained journalist Leroy Noel for questioning about his sources for articles on corruption charges made against the PM. Just prior to Noel's detention, the Government threatened to take legal action against any local media outlet that reprinted the corruption charges, which first appeared on a U.S.-based website (ref B). PM

Mitchell also reportedly threatened Noel personally after the journalist began reporting on the story. These incidents drew criticism from several NGOs, including the International Press Institute and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Anti-Media Epidemic

¶11. (U) An anti-media epidemic is sweeping the region, according to Wesley Gibbons, former President of the Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM), who complained in 2005 that "oppressive media laws" are "hovering" over the region and journalists increasingly face criminal charges when civil libel laws are available. The ACM has acknowledged the deficiencies of regional media, particularly a shortage of media workers with professional training and talk radio's lack of journalistic integrity, but the NGO has also recognized talk radio as a democratizing force that has given the region's previously marginalized people an opportunity to voice their opinions. In May 2006, an ACM statement marking World Press Freedom Day opined that governments continue to greet an increasingly dynamic Caribbean media with "regulatory sanction and censorship." Similar criticism of regional governments was offered by the International Press Institute (IPI), a spokesman for which complained in March that increasing attempts to "stifle critical coverage" in the press was a "serious threat to freedom of expression and opinion in the Caribbean." The IPI has detailed incidents of Caribbean governments seeking to intimidate the press in its annual World Press Freedom Review.

Comment

¶12. (C/NOFORN) The ongoing attempts by Governments and individual politicians to intimidate the press into being less critical and more compliant is characteristic of Eastern Caribbean political culture. Despite inheriting democratic traditions from their former colonial master, these small-island states remain in many ways politically immature.

They are independent nations in which prime ministers and other officials are given considerable power and the trappings of full state sovereignty over what are in reality extraordinarily small communities, smaller than most American municipalities. Prime ministers oversee all aspects of governance from foreign affairs down to paving the streets; there are no intermediaries such as local governments. This degree of control often results in politicians developing what one local observer has called "a little god mentality,"

in which a prime minister personifies the nation and criticism of individual leaders and their policies is taken as disloyalty to the state. As in the previously mentioned case of Dominica, criticism of the PM and his Government was seen as a threat to the "viability of our country."

¶13. (C/NOFORN) Such a political culture could endure in societies with limited media. The Eastern Caribbean countries traditionally had only a handful of weekly newspapers and one state-run radio and television station on each island. The past decade has witnessed, however, an increase in media outlets, particularly radio stations. The response from governments has been to embrace the new media only as far as they could manipulate them. Local newspapers that rely on considerable government advertising can be kept relatively docile. When newspapers get too critical or inquisitive, editors and journalists may be sued for libel or, in extreme circumstances, arrested. Radio, however, which relies on commercial advertising, is more difficult to control. Thus, prime ministers and other officials who are uncomfortable with daily, sustained disapproval threaten the critical media with new laws that they believe will rein them in.

¶14. (C/NOFORN) Many regional media outlets exacerbate this antagonism by exhibiting an egregious lack of professional

standards. Media organizations see themselves as labor unions rather than institutions that define and uphold professional standards as they do in the UK; nor do the Eastern Caribbean media maintain shared but non-institutionalized professional standards as in the U.S. Strong investigative and analytical reporting skills, though badly needed in the region, are scarce. Sources are rarely checked or verified, and often little or no distinction is made between allegations, exaggeration, and fact. Because Caribbean communities are so small, criticism on either side can quickly degenerate into personal attacks. This lamentable concurrence of factors makes it easier for politicians to justify their criticism of the press and calls to legislate media standards.

KRAMER